A Farmer's Other Life

Workshop at Dyckesville Is Source Of Violins, Violas by Louis Ropson

By LOIS KERIN

Louis Ropson leads two lives.

During the summer he is busy with his farm and orchard at Dyckesville. But during the winter months he enjoys the solitude of his workshop where, to the recorded accompaniment of the world's finest symphonies, he produces violins, violas and cellos.

It's interesting to learn when you see one of Ropson's highly-polished instruments that it was 15 years in the making. He never works with wood seasoned for less than that period, his insurance against warping.

Although he imports some of the woods from Switzerland, he says the best instruments are made from Wisconsin woods. They are made with spruce tops and maple backs and given 15 to 18 coats of well-rubbed varnish over a two-year period.

Began in 1934

Ropson's interest in violin making began in 1934 when he got his first pointers from Mike Lawrence of Green Bay. Succeeding "helpers" included the late Ed Rademacher, De Pere; James N. Kavanaugh, former Brown County agricultural agent, and Frank Wavrunek, Two Rivers.

Richard Kellogg, Green Bay, is still counted on for a bit of advice when its viola-making time. David Franz, Manitowoc, is the violin "adviser."

There was a special demand for violas after World War II because none were available from European craftsmen.

Two of Ropson's cellos are being played by members of the Green Bay Symphony, one by Elie DeDryver, Escanaba, and the other by Kay Juno. Melba Hansen, a Sturgeon Bay music teacher, is also interested in Ropson's work.

Sold to Universities

Ropson-made violins have been sold to Boston University and the University of Texas. One has gone to South America with Dr. Sigfreid Prager, a former teacher at the University of Wisconsin who now lives in Argentina. Dr. Prager conducted an opera-appreciation course at the UW Extension Center here, and is well known in state music circles.

Although violins are copied from the Stradivarius, Ropson does his own blueprints and executes his own designs. For instance a cello back, which is 29½ inches deep, is divided into 72 parts. From these divisions the rest of the measurements are determined.

Of course, the most important job in making a fine instrument is post setting, done in the final stages. Frames are clamped together until the glue dries. Next the lining is glued on, clamped, and the drying process repeated.

Makes Some Tools

Hundreds of tools are used, especially chisels and gouges in varying sizes. Those he could not buy, Ropson made. Some of the panes (shoes) are only an inch long.

To date Mr. Ropson has fashioned 64 violins, 44 violas and eight cellos in the workshop near his house.

Does he play any of them? No. But Ropson is an accomplished organist, a career that embraces 48 years of study and pleasure. He was a pupil of the late Rev. Mathias J. Vanden Elzen, studied with the late Rev. A. L. Dobblesteen, and then spent three years at the University of Wisconsin. He serves as organist and choir director at St. Louis Church in Dyckesville.

What Ropson likes best about instrument-making is the visitors it attracts to his neat little home a mile east of Dyckesville on County Trunk S. His wife, too, enjoys having people call.

Members of the Pro Arte Quartet have been among his guests, as well as musicians from several states. They are as welcome as an Italian opera on a Saturday afternoon.

THE FINISHED PRODUCT

—Press-Gazette Photos by Emery Kroening

LOUIS ROPSON, DYCKESVILLE . . . HE BUILDS FOR MUSIC-MAKERS

THE CRAFTING OF A CELLO . . . framework constructed . . . fashioning of the scroll . . . shoeing operation